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SUBJECT: CULTURAL REVOLUTION REMEMBERED BY SOME, FORGOTTEN
BY MANY AMID PARTY-IMPOSED SILENCE

REF: BEIJING 3744

Classified By: Classified by Acting Political Internal Unit Chief
Susan Thornton. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

1. (C) Chinese authorities are treading carefully around sensitive anniversaries this month related to the launch of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. The Propaganda Department has restricted media commemorations or commentary. Security officials have prevented some survivors of the tumult from attending international conferences on the subject and discouraged others from talking to the press. Contacts said the tight controls stem from official fears that raising questions anew about the Cultural Revolution, as well as Mao Zedong's role in it, risks undermining the legitimacy of Party rule and the current leadership. Scholars told us they believe unbiased research into the Cultural Revolution is urgent while some key players and victims remain alive. Nonetheless, there is little serious agitation in intellectual circles for an official reassessment of this controversial chapter in China's history. Instead, changing the Party's verdict on the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown and addressing current social ills take precedence. End Summary.

A Season of Anniversaries

2. (C) May and June were crucial months in the opening stages of the Cultural Revolution 40 years ago. On May 16, 1966, the Government released a circular announcing the creation of the Cultural Revolution Group under the Politburo Standing Committee. This was followed on May 25 by the appearance of a "big character poster" attacking the intellectual establishment. Then, on May 31, nationwide inflammatory propaganda broadcasts got the movement underway in earnest. A number of sensitive dates come in August, marking 40 years since Mao expressed support for the Red Guards as well as his writing a big character poster headlined "bombard the headquarters" that was an attack on State President Liu Shaoqi. The May 16 anniversary passed quietly in Beijing this year and contacts told us there are no plans for conspicuous commemorations of other key dates.

Media Remains Quiet

3. (C) Mainland media has orders to remain quiet on the matter. At the end of 2005, the Propaganda

Department issued guidance prohibiting media outlets from running unsanctioned articles about the 40th anniversary of the start of the Cultural Revolution in 2006, said Dong Yuyu (protect), a journalist at Party mouthpiece the Guangming Daily. His newspaper printed one of two recent articles that appeared about the anniversary. The article ran on May 16 and repeated the established official position on the Cultural Revolution, that is, it was "a disaster of enormous magnitude" but that society must "stay united and be forward looking." A similar piece from the Central Committee journal Qiushi was posted on the Xinhuanet online wire service website May 25. Aside from raising questions of Party legitimacy, discussion of the sensitive topics like the Cultural Revolution are unwelcome in the runup to the 17th Party Congress next year, said Wu Jiexiang (protect), an author who served as Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang's staff assistant in the 1980s and who maintains links to current officialdom.

14. (C) The controls extend beyond media. Several prominent Beijing-based scholars invited to attend a symposium on the Cultural Revolution hosted by City University of New York-Staten Island in May received a warning from the local Public Security Bureau not to participate. Among them were three professors who signed an open letter in February supporting ousted Freezing Point editor Li Datong (reftel). Historian Ding Dong (protect), a signatory to the Li letter, told Poloff he asked the PSB if he could travel to the United States during the May timeframe anyway if he promised not to attend the symposium. He related that the PSB warned him that if he tried to fly, border officials at Beijing airport would confiscate his

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passport to ensure he did not travel. Former editor of the Public Interest Times Chen Jieren told poloff that several high-profile figures from the Cultural Revolution were warned by authorities not to accept media interviews on the subject.

Legitimacy and Social Stability

15. (C) Sensitivity about reexamining the Cultural Revolution reflect concerns that doing so could undermine the Party and the current leadership, our contacts said. "To open the Cultural Revolution to public discussion would raise the question of Mao's legitimacy," remarked Zhang Guangyou (protect), former editor of the Farmer's Daily and a longtime Embassy contact. By implication, this would cast doubt on the legitimacy of Mao's successors, the current Party leadership and the Party's claim to the right to rule, he added. Zhang stressed that discussing the Cultural Revolution following the collapse of the Soviet Union has become much more sensitive. "Before we could blame the disaster on the errors of one man," he said, "but now people can see that it was the system that brought us to disaster."

16. (C) Controls on discussion of the movement's history are stricter now than 10 years ago, noted Cui Weiping (protect), a professor at the Beijing Film Academy who is active in reform circles and who was warned off the CUNY symposium. Current official skittishness about difficult history reveals concerns over social tensions, particularly the gap between rich and poor, she said. Cui noted that in 1996, when many prominent universities conducted scholarly seminars about the 30th anniversary of the Cultural Revolution, the social frictions were less pronounced.

Not the Top Priority

17. (C) Many historians and intellectuals desire a thorough accounting of the events of the Cultural Revolution while key figures (and millions of aging victims) are still alive, our contacts assessed. But for a majority of reformist-leaning scholars, such a project is not the top priority, author Wu said. The Government has reached an incomplete verdict on the Cultural Revolution, but at least the tragedy is officially considered wrong and a disaster. This is not the case with the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown, Wu observed. He added that even though the June 4 events affected far fewer people than the Cultural Revolution, official willingness to reconsider the Tiananmen record would be a concrete sign that Chinese Government is moving toward more openness.

Generation Gap

18. (C) The Cultural Revolution, Tiananmen and other traumatic chapters of China's recent past remain uncharted territory for most university students today. Cui of the Beijing Film Academy related that she gave her students some introductory material to read about the Cultural Revolution. But very few students approached her to ask questions. Taken in isolation, the unrest made no sense to the students because they have never had an accurate picture of the history of the political campaigns of the 1950s, or even of the rest of the 20th century back to the Boxers, she said. Dong of Guangming Daily separately made a similar point, adding that parents, if they had bad experiences, avoid discussing the Cultural Revolution with their children. The fear is that the children will mention it publicly at school and then be branded as a person with incorrect thinking.

Quiet Commemorations

19. (C) Despite the official touchiness about commemorations, some people and institutions have found ways to quietly mark the Cultural Revolution anniversary. The historian Ding said he attended a conference on the Cultural Revolution in mid-May at Bohai University in Liaoning Province. He said participants, many of whom had been victims of the unrest in the 1960s and 70s, held discussions groups and read essays survivors had written. In Ding's

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view, the conference went ahead successfully because the organizers kept a low profile and Bohai University is far enough from Beijing so as not to attract unwelcome attention from central authorities. Meanwhile, Ding's wife Xing Xiaoqun, a professor at the China Youth University for Political Science, organized an "underground" meeting of 16 scholars to discuss the Cultural Revolution. She is preparing an oral history, recording victims' own accounts of their experiences on tape. Many other scholars are publishing articles in specialized intellectual journals within China and in Hong Kong.
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